

# Whither Historic Contexts?

## Their Role in 21st-Century Planning

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In 1983, the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Preservation Planning were published in the *Federal Register*.<sup>1</sup> These represent the Secretary's "best advice" on preservation planning activities. The three Standards read (somewhat condensed):

**Standard I. Preservation Planning Establishes Historic Contexts.** Decisions about the identification, evaluation, registration, and treatment of historic properties are most reliably made when the relationship of individual properties to other similar properties is understood. The historic context [is a framework that] organizes information based on a cultural theme and its geographical and chronological limits. Contexts describe the significant broad patterns of development in an area that may be represented by historic properties. The development of historic contexts is the foundation for decisions about identification, evaluation, registration, and treatment of historic properties.

**Standard II. Preservation Planning Uses Historic Contexts to Develop Goals and Priorities for the Identification, Evaluation, Registration, and Treatment of Historic Properties.** A series of preservation goals is systematically developed for each historic context to ensure that the range of properties representing the important aspects of each historic context is identified, evaluated, and treated. Then priorities are set for all goals... The goals with assigned priorities established for each historic context are integrated to produce a comprehensive and consistent set of goals and priorities for all historic contexts in the geographic area of a planning effort.

**Standard III. The Results of Preservation Planning Are Made Available for Integration into Broader Planning Processes.** Preservation of historic properties is one element of larger planning processes. Planning results, including goals and priorities, information about historic properties, and any planning documents, must be transmitted in a usable form to those responsible for other planning activities.

Guidelines for using these Standards explained an approach for developing historic context documents that included public participation and provided for updating and revision when new information becomes available. A brief review of this guidance follows.

The historic context is the cornerstone of the planning process. It provides a mechanism, a process, for assessing and organizing information about patterns of prehistory and history, and about historic and cultural resources; for identifying a full range of associated property types; and for defining goals and priorities for the identification, evaluation, registration, and treatment of historic properties. Historic contexts can be developed at a variety of scales appropriate for local, state, and regional planning. In actual practice, historic contexts can also vary considerably in the level of detail at any scale; some can be quite detailed, while others can be very general, depending upon the amount of information available and how they will be used, and these can co-exist at the same scale. However, historic contexts lose their effectiveness if they are defined so broadly that all historic resources are included in a single historic context, or so narrowly that only one type of resource is covered by a historic context.

Historic contexts subdivide the prehistoric and historic development of an area in time and space. Each context is defined on the basis of a developmental **theme**, and the **geographical** and **chronological** limits of that theme. The **theme** consists of a series of related trends or developments that occurred in the past. The historic context describes one or more features of the prehistoric or historic development of an area, and identifies patterns or trends that the historic and cultural resources represent. For example, a suburbanization theme may focus on a period in history characterized by a gradual shift in an area's rural focus to one oriented toward a nearby urban center. Related trends include the construction of suburban housing tracts, expanded transportation networks, and associated social, economic, and political systems. These developments are tangibly

apparent in a set of historic and cultural resources, such as new housing styles, designed street patterns and residential landscapes, shopping centers, and trolley lines and stations. Without the theme definition and description, the historical roles played by, and the relationships among, these types of resources might be imperfectly understood.

The **geographical limits** of a theme define the physical boundaries of the historic context. These boundaries are directly related to the theme, since its trends and developments occurred in specific areas and locations. The geographic limits of our suburbanization theme will encompass the areas of suburban development, the network of trolley lines, and associated commercial development.

Not only is a theme bounded geographically, but also **chronologically**. Prehistoric and historic developments passed through cycles of initial formation, growth, stability, decline, and abandonment. The beginning and end of one or more of these cycles can be used to mark the chronological boundaries of the theme. For our suburbanization theme, suburban development began about 1890 and continues up to the present.

An important feature in the development of a historic context is the identification of property types that represent the defined theme. A property type is a grouping of individual resources based on shared physical, functional, or associative characteristics. Property types link the conceptual basis of the historic context's theme with actual and potential resources that illustrate the theme, as in the suburbs, trolley lines, and shopping centers of our suburbanization historic context. Locational patterns and the condition of known and expected properties are identified, and gaps in information about the theme and its properties are defined.

The development of goals and priorities establish each historic context as a planning document. A goal is a statement of preferred preservation activity, generally stated in terms of property types. Preservation goals can deal with a variety of historic and cultural resource needs, including identification, registration, and treatment, as well as addressing information needs, research, and interpretation. Setting priorities for the goals is based on an examination of a number of factors, such as the conditions of individual resources; social, economic, political, and environmental conditions and trends affecting the resources;

costs and technical considerations associated with resource identification, protection, and research; and the extent to which such work has already been carried out on resources associated with the historic context.

For any area, there will likely be a number of historic contexts describing its prehistory and history, and the historic and cultural resources that represent that past. Balancing and adjusting the goals and priorities from all of these historic contexts results in an overall set of goals and priorities for the area's resources. This set of goals, together with other goals addressing other important preservation-related issues, such as increasing public knowledge about the past or strengthening preservation legislation, form the core of that area's preservation plan. These preservation goals and priorities are adapted to contemporary land units through integration with other planning concerns, which involves resolution of conflicts that arise when competing resources, uses, goals, policies, and plans occupy, occur, and apply to the same land base.

### ***Where Do We Go From Here?***

At the time of their issuance in 1983, the Secretary's Standards and Guidelines defined the practice of preservation planning, especially for those practitioners working in federally guided historic preservation programs. For some time afterward, preservation planning meant the development of scholarly historic context documents and compiling them into hefty, encyclopedic tomes called historic preservation plans. Tremendous effort went into producing these documents, and many were accompanied by condensed versions attractively published for general public consumption. Cultural resource specialists and managers, especially in land-managing agencies, continue to depend on the scholarly information presented in historic contexts to carry out their daily responsibilities.

It eventually became clear, however, that planners and managers who were not specialists in cultural resource management or historic preservation did not always need, and often could not use, that level of technical detail in order to make their daily decisions about historic and cultural resources. As a result, historic preservation plans were developed to serve their needs that did not actually contain historic context documents, although they may have been referenced and used as support studies. This situation has become more and more common, and at the beginning of

the 21st century, one rarely hears historic contexts mentioned in the same breath as preservation planning. The exception is in situations where cultural resource specialists use these technical documents on a daily basis to make recommendations or decisions about historic and cultural resources.

What, then, is the role of historic contexts in preservation planning as we move into the 21st century? Whether they are incorporated between the covers of a land-managing agency's cultural resource management plan or used as supporting documentation for a local preservation plan, historic contexts are a critical and fundamental component in preservation planning. The historic context is a tool that helps us increase our knowledge about historic and cultural resources, and helps us make informed decisions about their protection and management.

Preservation planning is, first and foremost, resource-based; that is, our goals and priorities rest on a foundation of organized data and thinking about protecting historic resources derived from what we currently know about resources in the planning area. Historic contexts provide a rational and carefully considered process to bring resource-based concerns and issues into the broader planning environment.

Preservation planning as practiced in the late 20th century and early 21st century places historic contexts in broader perspective by viewing them as "specialized planning studies," as technical historic resource analyses that are necessary to support issue statements and goals in the plan. In addition, historic contexts continue to provide critical support for related activities such as survey, research, and nominations to the National Register of Historic Places.

The purposes of historic contexts help us answer basic planning questions:

- To compile, synthesize, analyze, and assess the state of knowledge about historic and cultural resources: What do we know, what don't we know, what do we have?
- To evaluate comparative significance of historic and cultural resources: What is worth preserving? What merits expenditures of time and money for protection?
- To establish goals and priorities for identifying, evaluating, registering, and treating historic properties with shared prehistoric/historic characteristics: What needs to be done?

To serve these purposes, historic context documentation, by necessity, focuses on the his-

toric and cultural resources themselves, and contains scholarly and technical assessments of historic and prehistoric themes and properties. Preservation professionals need this kind of information; it is what the technical experts need in order to make day-to-day, project-specific, technical decisions. This is **not**, however, the information that planners and other non-preservation decisionmakers need, understand, or can use when they make decisions about how land is to be used. For example, several years ago, the preservation staff in a large city prepared a number of historic contexts and gave them to the planning office for review. The planners found the material very interesting, but they didn't see historic contexts as relevant or useful to their concerns. Several years ago, I helped to develop a 500-page local preservation plan that was chock full of prehistory, history, maps, charts, and lists of historic and cultural resources. We were very proud of this plan, but no one else could use it because it was too technical. As long as **we**, the preservation professionals, used the information to make recommendations to the decisionmakers, the plan was helpful. When we were not involved, the plan was not used, and land-use decisions continued to be made as if the preservation plan did not exist.

To be useful, historic context technical information needs to be "translated" into formats and terms that others can understand and use. Narrative historic context information may not be understandable or usable (or even considered relevant) by land-use planners and decisionmakers who need location and map-oriented information unencumbered by analytical and technical detail. This "translation" can take the form of a preservation plan developed from a foundation of historic contexts and written specifically for planners and decisionmakers, or the "translation" can be done by historic preservation specialists themselves, who examine historic contexts and communicate their recommendations to planners and decisionmakers.

In many, if not most, preservation planning situations, historic contexts function in much the same way as background studies or specialized planning studies that are prepared for a local comprehensive plan. Planners also generate technical information—specialized studies and support documentation for the plan, such as traffic counts, retail location studies, affordable housing analyses. These types of studies are essential because they provide the data, analyses, and conclusions upon which the plan's findings and goals

rely. However, these studies are usually too detailed, too technical, and their focus too narrow to be included in the plan document.

In addition to existing historic contexts, a range of other studies on non-resource issues, such as public outreach, public relations, heritage tourism, and preservation legislation, could be prepared, compiled, or used to support the development and revision of a preservation plan. A series of "working papers" or "discussion papers" could be prepared specifically for the plan development efforts, and studies and reports prepared for other reasons, such as survey reports, could also be examined. For example, as part of its plan development in 1986, the Maryland Historic Trust developed a series of "Preservation Policy White Papers" on such topics as:

- Regional and County-by-County Assessment of Survey Coverage
- Economic Benefits of Historic Preservation
- An Analysis of the Impact of Historic Preservation on the State's Tourism Industry
- A Summary of Historic Preservation and Affordable Housing

Other planning studies could focus on characterizing the resource inventory in various ways, in order to define areas that may need attention during the planning process. It may be more important to conduct these kinds of analyses if portions of the resource inventory have not yet been addressed in historic context documents. Some of the studies could be done to address the following questions:

- What do we know about the resources? How well do we know it? What don't we know?

- What areas have, and have not yet, been surveyed for what kinds of resources?
- What kinds of resources have been recorded and what kinds have not?
- What time periods are or are not represented, and how well?
- Where are the resources located?
- What condition are they in?
- What resources are already protected and how?
- How effective are existing protection mechanisms and incentives, and how can they be strengthened?
- Who controls the resources?
- What resources are valued by the public? What is public opinion about historic preservation?

In order to plan well for the identification, evaluation, registration, and treatment of historic and cultural resources, information about these resources must be organized into manageable units before it can be useful in planning and decisionmaking. Historic contexts perform this function and, therefore, continue to have an essential role to play in preservation planning. For perhaps the majority of situations, historic contexts are critical, specialized planning studies that are necessary to frame and support conclusions, statements of conditions, issues, goals, and priorities in the preservation plan. Historic contexts are not, and were not meant to be, the preservation plan or the sum total of all planning activities. As Yogi Berra allegedly said, "If you don't know where you're going, you won't get there." Historic contexts help us determine where we are going to protect historic and cultural resources, and the strategies we can use to get there.



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